Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930
by **Jerrold Seigel**
New York: Viking Penguin, 1986, 453 pp.

The Tranformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World, 1940-1985
by **Diane Crane**
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 194 pp.

By the mid-nineteenth century artists in all fields gradually claimed an independence that was to be an essential condition of modern creation. The clarity and intransigence of their self-conscious break from tradition and the conventional institutions of support have no equivalents in the previous history of art and literature. More currently, the spirit of defiance and innovation that marked the modernist avant-garde is perceived as exhausted. Hastening to fill the gap is postmodernism. The air crackles with postmodernist rhetoric. Yet it is very difficult to make out the exact political and cultural content of so many words and so many gestures designed to suggest that some momentous change has overtaken us. So it behooves us to examine some of the historical and sociological reasons for the eclipse of modernism. The two books under review, though different in method and style, propose to do just that.

Jerrold Seigel's *Bohemian Paris* explores the culture and politics of Paris between 1830 and 1940. Seigel, a historian, treats the avant-garde as a play coiled within the larger play of Bohemia, and in so doing throws substantial light on why Bohemia was essential in carrying the arts into a period of renewal and accomplishment. By contrast, Diana Crane's book, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde*, deals chiefly with the succession of avant-garde movements that flourished in New York between 1940 and 1985. Crane, a sociologist, focuses on the disintegration of the New York avant-garde from a close-knit community of competing groups into an image-making business that alternatively stimulates and entertains but does not threaten the middle class with its aesthetic provocations.

Bohemian Paris is a well crafted piece of cultural history. Through a careful synthesis of archival material, biography, and political and literary analysis, Seigel has both recreated the whimsical and tragic figures of Bohemia, and brought into sharp focus the ambivalent relation of the modern artist to bourgeois life. Each chapter of the book is given over to the study of one or two bohemian figures. With the exception of the painter Gustave Courbet and the composer Erik Satie, all the principals examined had a literary background. None are women. That Seigel had so little to say about bohemian women—who are marginalized to the role of *grisettes*, the working class lovers of artistic bohemians—is certainly the main oversight of the book. Beyond that, it also points to a traditional phallocentric history of modernism where the historical voices of women remain muted.

Beginning with the work and life of Henry Murger (1822-1861), who popularised Bohemia with his successful musical stage play *Scenes of Bohemian Life*, Seigel leads us into a cultural underworld that was home to ragpickers, artists, criminals and gypsies—Parisians thought that all gypsies came from Bohemia and that artists were becoming gypsylike. Murger equates Bohemia with romantic rebellion, easygoing tolerance, and opposition to the dominant culture. In his stories, Bohemia is portrayed as a world where sheer existence was a work of genius and imagination; a place where the discontented bourgeoisie could satisfy their restlessness and artistic sensibilities.

But the real Bohemia, maintains Seigel, is not easily contained within this romantic definition, for it filled a complex social role. It functioned as a powerful symbolic aid to the rising bourgeoisie who, wanting to shore up tradition and stability, associated Bohemia with all that was pathological and aberrant in modern society. As technical and political revolution caused received structures and conventions to fall apart, Bohemia also became an accessible laboratory in which the tendencies emergent in modern society were tested.

In his opening chapters Seigel does a persuasive job describing the political life of the French capital. In Paris, the intense conflicts among a still powerful aristocracy, a self-assured, ascending bourgeoisie, and an aroused working class made for continual clashes. The revolution of 1848 and the Commune of 1871 intensified these tensions, especially inside Bohemia where political radicalism was more pronounced. Marx, for his part, was suspicious of radicals bred in an environment that was also the home of the *lumpen* and the "ruined offshoots of the bourgeoisie." He had little sympathy for the disintegrated mass of Bohemia, which he disdainfully associated with swindlers, pickpockets, and *literati*. While it is true, says Seigel, that Bohemia was a higgledy-piggledy assortment of political adventurers and radicals, their styles of life were nonetheless crucial in shaping a political milieu which tolerated extremes of heterodoxy. In Bohemia, one could dramatize any number of political stances, and every political act was given a double significance, as public defiance and as grand personal gesture.

The chief beneficiaries of bohemian life were artists, who found in it a personal inspiration: not a way to live in society but a way to live with themselves, with their own feelings and sensibilities. This was the case, for example, with the Water-Drinkers—a relatively obscure group, who Seigel explores in some detail. Henry Murger had himself been a member of the ascetic Water-Drinkers, a coterie of aspiring writers, who retreated into their own cloistered world. In their willingness to live at the margins of society, and in their determination to make art without any compromises, we see early signs of the emergent avant-garde. The Water-Drinkers disbanded after one year, but their ideas about art and their hatred of a conventional public was shared by the painter Gustave Courbet, whose beery personality and commitment to realism without idealization brought him to the forefront of the Parisian art world by the mid 1850's. Courbet shunned the official Bonapartist salons and, anticipating the Impressionists, set up his own competing art gallery where he exhibited his work.

Bohemia offered artists the freedom to follow a vast variety of impulses. The irregular life of Bohemia also allowed for an experimental disorganization of sensations. Perhaps no other bohemian exemplified this tendency more than Charles Baudelaire. Seigel spends a lengthy chapter, chiefly informed by the work of Walter Benjamin, examining how Baudelaire used his bohemianism and dandyism as ways of exploring the self-diffusion of modern life. His bouts of alcoholism, his drug taking and his flights into debauchery were all means of fragmenting perceptions, and the only decent alternative to a society which had made money the goal of life.

Baudelaire's strategy of diffusing sensation was accompanied by its very opposite, concentration, which permitted him to remain within the limits of classical art and literature. But beginning with Verlaine and Rimbaud, both of whom Seigel covers in some detail, it became more difficult to maintain a separation between the inner life of the artist and the conventional forms of expression. A new dialectic was set in motion which was to produce one of the central ideas and myths of modernism: that by allowing the senses to be acted upon by external stimuli, artists could achieve, partly as a result of unconscious processes, and partly through the exercise of critical consciousness, the idioms and forms of new art.

By the first decade of the twentieth century a self-conscious avant-garde emerged ready to challenge the conventional limits of art. But because Seigel fails to make a clear distinction between the avant-garde and Bohemia, the reader is left wondering if the two are interchangeable. Seigel seems to treat them as such. The separation of the two camps is no minor cavil but an important issue to get clear. Bohemia is a fusion of contradictory cultural and political forces. The avant-garde is exclusive, more focused on its aesthetic experiments and declamations.

The final section of the book, though having a number of insightful things to say about Parisian Cabarets and their cooptive influence on Bohemia, is perhaps the most derivative, for it draws heavily on the work of Roger Shattuck on the origins of the avant-garde. Nearly all the avant-gardists that Seigel discusses wanted to free the creative potentials of the everyday by dissolving the boundaries between art and life. Alfred Jarry's bizarre philosophy of pataphysics, where logic and the chains of physical determinations are made arbitrary, prefigured the whole aesthetic of pastiche and Surrealism. Marcel Duchamp's famous project of turning bicycle wheels, hat racks, and urinals into art objects signaled the beginning of the modernist strategy of transforming any human product into art once it was removed from its normal context and associated with the artist's ouevre and personality. Erik Satie championed a similar idea in music, and his experiments with the lyrics of the everyday led him to *musique d'ameublement*, or furniture music. All of these interventions were designed to break down the hierarchies that consigned art to a separate sphere outside everyday life.

What is especially surprising, however, is that Seigel pays so little attention to the cultural and political implications of the aesthetization of everyday life. While touching lightly on this issue, Seigel never really explores it. This point is worth examining, since it is clearly at the core of what we now call postmodernism. If modernist writers and artists refused to be circumscribed by the "reality" of the everyday, neither could the everyday remain normal anymore in the old sense; everything had to be new and original, self-supporting and self-contained. The sounds, the technology, and the images of the ordinary items of daily life had to be privileged and given that absolute pre-emptory quality that one assigns to aesthetics. The irony is that the market, in its infinite adaptability, used modernist techniques to further commodify and exploit the representations of daily life. Increasingly, aesthetics intervened in the way politics and culture was understood and perceived. From here on

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As we get closer to the present historically, Seigel's whole analysis begins to reveal its veiled neo-Freudian biases. His discussion of the ambivalence between Bohemia and the dominant culture is especially burdened with Freudian freight. Here, the "self-dramatization" of bohemian life is seen as a form of adolescent rebellion. The avant-garde's interest in non-canonical innovation is similarly explained in terms of a psychological struggle between youthful rebels and the moral universe of their parents, rather than through the tropes of power or politics. Despite the occasional lapse into psycho-history, there is in this book much that is compelling and challenging. One of the things I like best about *Bohemian Paris* is Seigel's ability to marshall a wealth of suggestive information and bring to life a surprising array of bohemian figures, some notable others less so: the Goncourt bothers, Jules Vallès, Maurice Barrès, Emile Goudeau, to mention a few more. For any cultural historian this is a sensible strategy, one that enables Seigel to discuss the avant-garde and Bohemia through a practical examination of people's lives, rather than through highfalutin abstractions.

The arguments Diane Crane formulates in *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde* have become evident to many critics: that the avant-garde, which traditionally has loved to challenge its tiny audience and shock the bourgeoisie, has increasingly been absorbed into the mainstream of popular culture. Crane reaches her conclusion by analysing the rise of seven major styles of avant-garde art, and by examining the larger structural forces which have led to the *embourgeoisement* of the artist.

Crane has a love affair with classifications, charts, and statistical tables. Her enthusiasm for hard-edged data spills into her analysis of the seven styles that she maintains have dominated the New York art world for the past forty years: Abstract Expressionisism, Minimalism, Figurative Painting, Pop Art, Photorealism, Pattern Painting, and Neo-Expressionism. When discussing these styles, the book reads like the transcript of a tape for rent at a museum for a self-guided tour. Like most museum tapes, the narrative rigidly organizes the experiences that we are about to see.

Aided by 32 illustrations, we begins the tour with the early Abstract Expressionists' synthesis of Cubism and Surrealism (via Hans Hoffman), to the later stages of Abstract Expressionism where "the traces of the previous symbol system are removed" in favour of a surface that is "stripped of all secondary ideas." The crowning achievements of this style were the paintings of Jackson Pollock. Next, we have the Minimalists, who "pushed the boundary further by expunging all kinds of ideas, emotions, and values from the art work." What remained was the pure phenomenology of perception, of which Frank Stella explained, "what you see is what you see." Following the Minimalists we have the Figurative painters who, as Alex Katz put it, liked "style to take the place of content."

The limits of Crane's approach are evident. Certainly there are enough familiar names as background atmosphere, but the complexity of the art movements is obscured. Each style is given a simple interpretive frame and ambiguities are purged in the interest of keeping the narrative flowing smoothly. Still, the result is far from negative—it reads well. There is a semblence of coherence and continuity, and one does, by the end of the book, gain a cursory understanding of the "seven major styles" that left their imprint on the art scene of New York. What is absent from Crane's text, however, is the whole cultural temperament of the New York avant-garde. Information about galleries and art museums and content analyses of artistic styles fail to bring us closer to the power of ideas, the passion of convictions, the grandeur of artistic themes—and their complex relation to class, money, publicity and the market.

In the years following World War II American art made unprecedented incursions into European intellectual life, and New York was suddenly catapulted into the center of the avant-garde world. Given the new success of American cultural exports and the growing public interest in the arts, the number of galleries and museums increased dramatically. The number of artists nationwide similarly rose, and the word "art" found its place inside (if not onto) the walls of the American middle-class living room. All levels of government, maintains Crane, began to be interested in art as socially useful therapy. Art courses were prescribed for prison rehabilitation and as a solution to the problems of old age; art, it was claimed, lessened adolescent violence, encouraged craftmanship, and discouraged crime. Business increasingly saw art as a good investment and as a way of improving the corporate image. At the same time, entrenched political interest groups began to support the "travelling exhibition" as a kind of intellectual Marshall plan, and as propaganda for the American way of life.

While the infrastructure for the arts has been growing, so has the social and occupational role of the artist. Today's artists are flocking into the American academic system. The number of Fine Arts degrees awarded by American Universities rose from 525 per year in 1950 to 8,780 in 1980. And the academic world has become an important source of support, where artists serve at the periphery as visiting critics or artists in residence, or more centrally as part-time instructors and full-time staff. Others work in commercial arts or art related occupations such as editing, reviewing, curating, art dealing or administration. All this evidence, observes Crane, suggests that the artist's role has been professionalized.

With the professionalization of the artist, the typical definition of the avant-garde as the site where an intellectual cadre sees itself in aesthetic and cultural opposition to dominant values becomes increasingly untenable. And Art itself undergoes an important shift. The first dramatic changes came with Pop Art, which undermined the concept of high culture and fused the aesthetic of the modernist avant-garde with that of popular culture. The doyen of Pop Art, Andy Warhol, pushed that style to the limit. Pop Art did not simply used the themes and images of popular culture: it *became* a form of popular culture which appealed without difficulty, complexity, or snobbery to the masses.

More than any other style that followed Pop Art, Neo-Expressionism has been obsessed with mass produced images. Through the use of "pastiche," these self-proclaimed postmodernists recycled previous styles such as neo-romanticism, Surrealism, and other fashionable aspects of French and Italian art of the 30's and 40's. Julian Schnabel's descriptions of his painting are typical of the attitudes of the postmodernists, "my painting comes out from the continuum

Painted Water Glasses, *Janet Fish*
reprinted from ***The Transformation of the Avant-Garde***

of art that has been." The postmodernist approach has critical implications: namely, that in a society saturated and dominated by mass media, popular culture and pastiche are better able than the sacred pretentions of the avant-garde to provide the visual metaphors for the dilemmas of the everyday.

But some people argue, as Diana Crane does, that the cultural eclecticism promoted by postmodernism is itself the expression of a crisis of meaning, arising from the phenomenon of information being produced more rapidly than meaning systems can integrate and synthesize. What is missing from postmodernism is a genuine attempt to innovate and integrate. Lacking this potential, many neo-expressionists are satisfied with either pure entertainment value, or sinister provocation. Thus, the paintings of Eric Fischl and Robert Longo are full of violence, explicit sexuality, and a sense of undefined catastrophy designed to amuse and provoke the public.

According to Crane, the only art style that is at the vangard of innovation is Pattern painting, for reasons that are both sociological and aesthetic. Pattern painting is a movement that is primarily dominated by women, who have traditionally been excluded from the reward systems of modern art. Because artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro attempt to reclaim feminine subjects, there is a psychological and political content to their art that is noticebly missing from other groups.

Crane's book is a "sociology of art" constructed in a fairly conventional mold, but it does have a number of useful things to say about the contemporary arts and artists which are both pertinent and welcome, especially because they throw light on the reasons why the courage, audacity and innovation that were the original virtues of the avant-garde are now in decline. In some sense Seigel's *Bohemian Paris* and Crane's *Transformation of the Avant-Garde* speak to a similar issue. Crane blames the institutionalization of the artist within the university, as well as the spectacular growth of the art market and the infusion of massive funds into the art world by corporate and governmental institutions, for moving what had been a wilfully exclusive modern art movement into the mainstream of popular culture. In a complementary way, Seigel recognizes that it is difficult for the avant-garde to survive without a subcultural enclave that shelters and encourages adversarial expression.

Bohemia had its poseurs, its frauds and its nihilists who overwhelmingly outnumbered the serious artists, but it did offer an alternative community which prided itself on its unconventionality and an avowed independence. Bohemia and the avant-garde needed each other. Not only did they shake the complacency of society, but they made doing so a profession of faith. In our postmodernist interregnum both the artist and the intellectual, as Russell Jacoby has recently argued, have lost the quarrelsomeness and solemn sense of anti-values that were once found inside Bohemia. Such qualities are more difficult to express both from within the bureaucratic world of academe, and from the hyped *simulacra* of mass culture, which turned the eccentric forms of bohemian lifestyles into commodified expressions.

The eclipse of Bohemia and the avant-garde is closely bound to the emergence of a new moment in late-consumer capitalism. Modernism was proud of the demands it made on its audiences. Now the public, having fully integrated the aesthetic tricks of modernism, lives on its borrowed images. A portent of this trend is the transformation of history into an instantenous electronic present: self-enclosed, pre-emptive and fully aestheticised. If postmodernist art, or any kind of postmodernist inquiry, is to play a constructive critical role then it must restructure its cultural production so that it can once again call into question the reality principle of the middle class. Whether it can fulfil this role is still an open question, though time is running out and the room to maneuver increasingly restricted. We are at an ambiguous point in what has often been an ambiguous historical moment. And it is easy in the midst of this confusion and uncertainty to succumb to the soothing illusions of the *simulacra*, or an equally soothing dark vision of postmodernist pseudo-despair. The challenge is to move towards a more diverse and democratic culture, and perhaps, a new Bohemia.

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The Closing Of The American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy And Impoverished The Souls Of Today's Students
by **Allan Bloom**
(New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). 392 pp.

Two reports issued in 1983 fundamentally challenged the effectiveness of the American educational system. The first, *"A Nation at Risk,"* decried the "rising tide of mediocrity" in American Schools. It cited an "alarming decline" in educational standards and lowered SAT scores as evidence of crumbling educational standards and growing illiteracy.

The second report, by the 20th Century Fund criticized the Federal Government's role in education. It found federal intervention to be "counter-productive, entailing heavy costs and undesirable consequences." With these reports, the latest round of the "crisis" in American education was inaugurated. Since then, education has become a major national issue and the subject of several best-sellers, most notably—or notoriously—Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind.*

There can be little doubt that Bloom's work has tapped into some prevailing social sentiments, the ground for which has been prepared by the neo-conservative critique of education. Neo-conservatives see a legitimacy crisis in American education based on the excess demand put on the educational system by the forces of liberalism and individualism. Higher education in particular is troubled by the conflict between popular democratic tendencies and the "internal" functions of the universities, the training of professionals and social elites. Neo-conservatives claim that post-war educational reforms and the baleful influence of Deweyan progressivism have watered down educational standards; while intellectual leaders, suffering from a "failure of nerve," have not had the courage to stand up to students and dissident intellectuals and assert real standards.

The forces of conservative restoration attempt to solve the legitimacy crisis through a return to respect for authority and intellectual standards. Many, like Secretary of Education William Bennett, have called for a return to a core curriculum: a set of required texts which provide the student with the basic ideas of Western culture. For Bennett, these ideas are absolute truths which have been corrupted by the rise of moral and intellectual relativism.

Allan Bloom's conservative jeremiad takes off from the groundwork of the neo-conservative critique of higher education. However, he gives it an even more conservative twist, rooted in the philosophy of Leo Strauss. Like Bennett, Bloom sees relativism as the central educational problem. He seeks a return to reverence and respect for authority and absolute truth based on a renewed study of classic texts—texts which Bloom views largely as sacred. Bloom grounds his argument not only in the ideas of modern conservatism, but in Plato and Aristotle. He employs the ancient model of the human soul and the idea of a rational purpose in nature to buttress his critique of modern society.

Despite Bloom's academic credentials this is not a scholarly work. Not only does it lack citations and references, it is filled with misguided arguments and non-sequiturs. My personal favourite is a paragraph that begins with an allusion to Margaret Mead's sexual adventures and ends with the conclusion that "all such teachers of openness had either no interest in or were actively hostile to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution." There is no discernable connection between the substance of the paragraph and its conclusion.

The structure of the book is equally puzzling. Divided into three loosely connected sections, *The Closing of the American Mind* vacillates between a theoretical treatment of the rise of modernity rooted in a conservative *Kulturkritik*, and personal/intellectual vendettas—against old teachers at Chicago (for teaching relativism) and colleagues at Cornell (for giving in to the black students). Biography and criticism stand in an unresolved tension.

A treatment of these tensions would be a compelling and revealing task, however, I've chosen to focus on Bloom's arguments about the secularization of modern culture, for it is here that his link with the neo-conservative critique of education is most apparent and most insidious.

Bloom laments a disintegrating American culture racked by an easygoing nihilism which ultimately leads to the destruction of community. In treating all values as equal, it fails to affirm the distinction between good and evil, worthy and worthless. Characterized by a pervasive "openness" which accepts all without any rank order, American politics degenerates into an undiscriminating pluralism, which diverts politics into factionalism and social fragmentation. Modern pluralism, argues Bloom, views the polity as the competition of a discreet set of interests. It lacks any notion of a common public good.

If the modern polity is disordered, this is reflected in the disorder of the soul. For Bloom, as for Plato, the soul is an ordered hierarchy. The higher rational parts must govern and restrain the appetites. The *eros* that drives the soul must be shaped, moderated and directed to its true end, the good. This is the task of education. Not all, however, are capable of the proper ordering of the soul; they must be directed in other ways, by harnessing the will or the appetite in socially harmonious ways.

Modern culture does not engender the orderly shaping of eros. The modern family has lost the sense of piety and respect of the traditional family—though Bloom's notion of the traditional family has no real correlate in historical experience; it is more a figment of his conservative imagination. Bloom views the fam-